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Conflict in Cyprus: religion, ethnicity
and natural gas pipelines

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Abstract:

The recent discovery of natural gas fields on the Eastern Mediterranean is altering the political equilibrium between the interested countries that have direct interests on the exploration, exploitation and commercialisation of this natural gas. Cyprus is not an exception, and the discovery of the Aphrodite gas field is threatening the fragile political balance between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot governments, as well as the balance between the two countries that historically have played a protective role with both communities, Greece and Turkey.

These two countries and their foreign policies, for ethnic and religious reasons, have influenced on the political history developments that have taken place in Cyprus. Again, and within the context of an energy race, Turkey and Greece appear to go back to the decades of the 1970s and 1990s, whereas both foreign policies were based on territorial, political and military confrontation.

Although a military conflict between Athens and Ankara for the control of the natural gas fields seems remote, this fight is legitimising a political estrangement between the two blocks in Cyprus, complicating even more a peace settlement in this island.

Keywords:

Cyprus, Conflict, Eastern Mediterranean, Natural Gas, Foreign Policy, Greece, Turkey, EU.

***NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los **Documentos de Opinión** son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

Introduction

Religious and ethnic factors present in the Cypriot conflict have paved the way for external actors to take part in this conflict, exposing the resolution of this conflict to the political interests of third parties. Since 2011, this conflict has taken an economic dimension, as during that year a natural gas field was discovered in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Cyprus.

Energy is also a key element in the foreign policies of Turkey and Greece, the two most interventionist political actors in the history of the conflict in Cyprus. In this sense, both countries have projected incompatible plans for the transportation and commercialisation of the Cypriot natural gas as well as for other natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Besides this “zero-sum” energy race, national identity and belligerent discourses are being gradually embraced by the political elites of Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. This changing discourse is bringing back the 1990s political tension between the two communities in Cyprus and between Athens and Ankara, when military clashes were continuous.

Within this explosive political and economic context, a peace settlement in Cyprus appears to be fading away, as both communities have more arguments to legitimise an increased social and economic division, with the political support of their historical allies, Greece and Turkey, both members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Enosis vs. Taksim: Greek and Turkish foreign policies on Cyprus

Political tensions between the Turkish and Greek communities in Cyprus have always affected the political behaviour of Athens and Ankara in relation to this dispute, even before the independence of Cyprus in 1960.

In order to have a better understanding of the role played by Greece in this conflict, it is necessary to go back to the foundation of the Greek state. A key foundational element of this nation-state was the Greek Orthodox Church, an institution that unified all the Greek communities that were spread beyond the boundaries of the Kingdom of Greece that won

its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1821. Religion was therefore a formative element for the development of the idea of *Enosis* (union in Greek) and the subsequent territorial expansion of Greece¹.

The idea of *Enosis* was also fundamental in the political discourse of Greek-Cypriot leaders, who had as their main political goal the union of Cyprus with Greece. The Greek-Cypriot political elite was led by religious figures, which had much political and economic autonomy vis-à-vis Athens. As Perry Anderson mentions in his book *The New Old World*, «the Orthodox Church in Cyprus was without equivalent on any other Greek island. Autocephalous since the fifth century, its archbishop was equal in rank to the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria or Antioch, and under the Ottomans had always been the acknowledged head of the Greek community»².

In 1967, after a successful military coup in Greece, the political autonomy of the Greek-Cypriot leaders was in danger. During this period, Athens exerted its maximum level of political influence on the island, a situation which came to a head in 1974 when the Turkish army carried out a military operation that occupied part of Cyprus. In response, the Greek military junta staged a coup that dethroned Makarios, who was then the president of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). Despite Makarios being pro-*Enosis*, the Greek military junta disliked him because of his international alliances with “Third-World Movement” figures, such as Josip Broz Tito or Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Before Makarios’ deposition, military groups tied to the Greek military junta had already infiltrated Cypriot security bodies. In the 1950s, these same Greek military groups had previously created the National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters (*Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston - EOKA*), one of the most criminal armed groups that operated in Cyprus.

As a reaction to the formation of this armed group, Ankara armed and trained Turkish-Cypriot followers of the ultranationalist politician Rauf Denктаş, who led the formation of the so-called Turkish Resistance Organization (*Türk Mukavemet Teskilati – TMT*).

¹ STEFANIDIS, Ioannis, “Isle of Discord: Nationalism, Imperialism and the Making of the Cyprus Problem”, C. Hurst & Co., London, 1999.

² ANDERSON, Perry “The New Old World”, Verso Books, 2009.

The TMT embodied the ultranationalist discourse of Denктаş, which pushed for the partition of the island (*Taksim*) and the possible annexation from Turkey of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which was unilaterally declared in 1983. Under ethnic, religious and linguistic values, Denктаş considered the Turkish-Cypriots as part of the Turkish nation. The TRNC was then popularly known as the *Yavru Vatan*, or «Baby Nation».

As a result of increased tensions between the two communities, triggered as well by the guerrilla warfare between the EOKA and the TMT, the political equilibrium in Cyprus became unsustainable and paved the way for the military intervention of Greece and Turkey. In 1974, Makarios was dethroned by Greek-Cypriot security forces loyal to the Greek military junta; in response, the Turkish army invaded a third of the island later that same year.

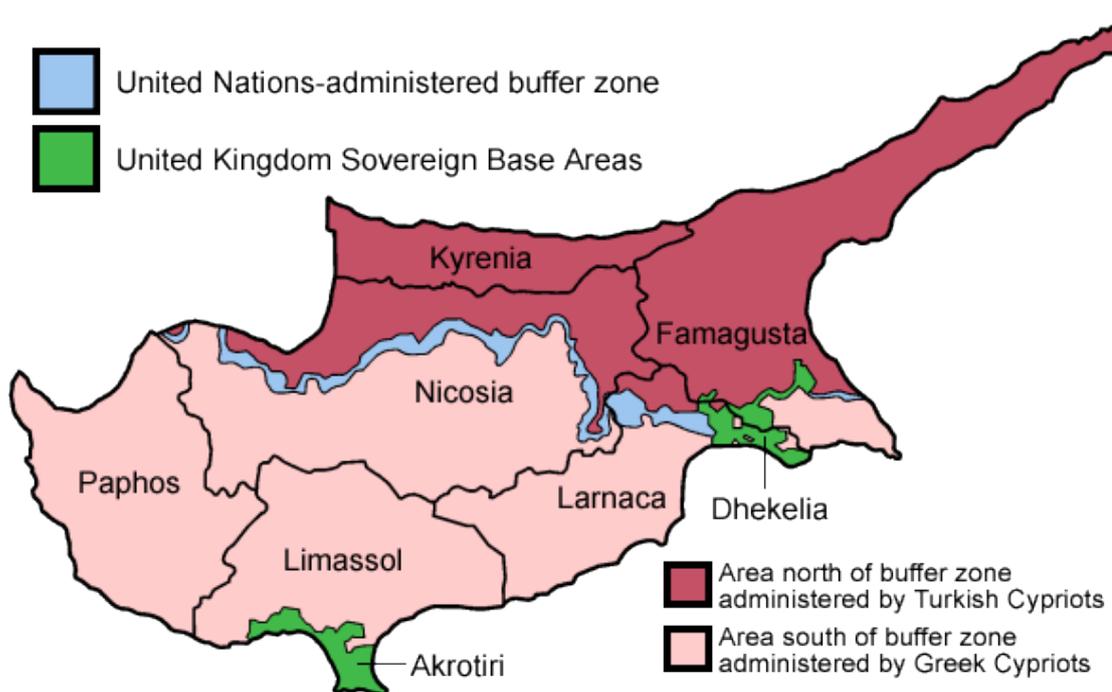


Figure 1: Map of the island of Cyprus and its political division.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

The ceasefire that followed the military confrontation of 1974 did not include any clauses to prevent the occurrence of future military and political confrontation between the two communities in Cyprus, and between Greece and Turkey.

Both Athens and Ankara steadily reduced their political meddling in the Cyprus conflict until the 2000s. Despite this intention, during the 1980s, Greece tried to internationalise

the Cyprus conflict by relating this issue with the Aegean dispute between Turkey and Greece.

As part of these political tensions, in 1997, the RoC (supported by Greece) acquired S-300 missiles, made in Russia. This acquisition triggered the political reaction of Turkey and of the international community, which accused the RoC and Greece of destabilising the fragile regional political equilibrium. Although Greece supported this acquisition, the RoC was finally forced to dismantle these surface-to-air missiles, which were finally sent to Crete.

Finally, in 2004, the RoC was accepted as member of the European Union (EU), supported by Greece. This membership meant a definitive step for the political autonomy of Nicosia vis-à-vis Athens, who also abandoned the idea of *Enosis*. Within this context, Athens could not claim any territorial annexation, while Cypriot national security became EU responsibility.

At the same time, political and military hostilities between Ankara and Athens were reduced during this period, and accordingly, the Cyprus issue lost political importance within the Turkish national political dynamics. As a result, the chances for a peace settlement in Cyprus increased, especially after the electoral victory in Turkey of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP – Justice and Development Party), in 2002.

According to Professor Erol Kaymak, from the Eastern Mediterranean University, before the arrival to power of the AKP, Ankara's policy in Cyprus was designed by Rauf Denktaş, who was an influential figure within the *Kemalist*³ circles in Ankara. Professor Kaymak points out, «Turkish military officers secured their career progression by spending time in the TRNC and by developing a good relation with Denktaş». Kaymak also highlights that Denktaş was able to place the Cypriot conflict in the Turkey-Greece confrontation.

In exchange for Denktaş gaining political influence in Ankara, the Turkish secular elite enjoyed a privileged economic status in the TRNC through the ownership of luxurious

³ *Kemalism* is the founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey, established in 1923, led by Mustafa Kemal, a military officer of the Ottoman Empire, who received a new name, "Atatürk", meaning "father of the Turks". This ideology is based in secularism and the Westernisation/modernisation of the Turkish society. As a state ideology, *kemalism* was embraced by the political and economic elites of the Turkish republic. After Atatürk's death, these elites monopolised this ideology and used it to legitimise their power. These elites were self-proclaimed as the guardians of this ideology, and were formed by the army and the bureaucracy.

properties. Moreover, the role of the Turkish army in this conflict increased its social prestige back in Turkey and allowed them as well to obtain major funds for the defence budget⁴.

The arrival, in 2002, of the AKP to power in Turkey changed for the first time the foreign policy of this country towards Cyprus. This policy change has to be understood under an internal power struggle context in Turkey, where a new conservative political elite, led by the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was fighting against the *Kemalist* establishment. Interestingly, it was the conservative political class that pushed for Turkey's EU membership, where Cyprus and a peace settlement appeared as key elements to reach this political goal⁵. During this time, therefore, the AKP reduced the presence of the Cyprus issue in its political discourse; Denktaş simultaneously witnessed the diminishment of his political influence in Ankara.

Within this context, the historical evolution of the Cypriot conflict shows how the interests of international actors, such as Turkey or Greece, increase or diminish the intensity of a conflict and the chances of its resolution.

Post-Cold War in the Eastern Mediterranean

Although Ankara and Athens reduced their political ties in Cyprus, during these last months, these two countries have increased their hostilities in the disputed waters of the Aegean Sea and consequently in Cyprus. In December 2017, President Erdoğan visited Greece, where he questioned the legitimacy of the Treaty of Lausanne, and demanded its revision⁶. This treaty, signed in 1923, established the modern borders between Greece and Turkey, after these two countries had been fighting for years and had carried out massive population exchanges. By questioning this treaty, Erdoğan revived the historical conflict of Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea, indirectly affecting the Cyprus issue.

⁴ ROBINS, Philips, "Turkish foreign policy since 2002: between a 'post-Islamist' government and a Kemalist state", *International Affairs*, 83:1, 289-304, 2007.

⁵ Ídem.

⁶ Ekathimerini, "Greece, Turkey and the Aegean", 11th June 2018, available at <http://www.ekathimerini.com/229457/opinion/ekathimerini/comment/greece-turkey-and-the-aegean> Date of query , 14.06.2018

From “Zero Problems” to old enemies

Before President Erdoğan recently attacked Lausanne, Turkish foreign policy under the AKP had grown increasingly critical of international treaties that had established modern nation states in the Middle East. Treaties such as Sèvres (1920) (afterwards replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne) and Sykes-Picot (1916) have been the target of Turkish officials during this last decade. By doing so, Turkey legitimised its political intromission in Arab countries, especially during the 2011 popular revolts, the so-called “Arab Spring”.

One of the main designers of this Turkish foreign policy was Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was appointed as Minister of Foreign Relations in 2009. Davutoğlu, a member of the AKP and a university professor, designed this foreign policy in accordance to his academic theories. These theories placed Turkey as a regional and global power, holding a middle-grown position between the EU and the Middle East, appealing to the Ottoman imperial past, and in a context where the EU faced one of its major economic and social crises.

This new Turkish foreign policy was called “Zero Problems” with neighbouring countries, which emphasized historical ties with Turkey’s neighbours (neglected by the *Kemalist* elite) and encouraged increased economic exchanges with these countries.

Within this political discourse, where Turkey plays a key role in the political and economic relations between West and East, the Turkish government has presented projects by which Turkey is to become an “energy hub” as part of the “2023 Vision” policy, the year that commemorates the hundred anniversary of the Republic of Turkey. This way, the AKP projected an image of a short-term future scenario where Turkey would become the major exporter of energy to European markets. This energy policy was in part supported by the EU, as European countries are trying to reduce their energy dependence on Russia.

Davutoğlu’s policies allowed Turkey to approach old enemies, as with the case of Russia, Greece, and Iran. At the same time, Turkey was praised by foreign Western powers as a regional example of harmony between political Islam and democracy, while the AKP gained political influence in other Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Qatar, Egypt, and Libya.

The “Zero Problem” foreign policy seemed to have been the most successful Turkish foreign policy ever, as with the 2011 “Arab Spring”, Turkey and the AKP increased their regional supporters.

Despite this initial euphoria of Turkish support in the Middle East, the political outcome of the “Arab Spring” did not bring the political results expected in Ankara, as the political allies of Turkey lost political power. Moreover, in 2013, the AKP witnessed massive demonstrations against the government’s authoritarian drift and corrupt practices known as the *Gezi Park* movement.

This political cocktail forced a change in Turkey’s foreign policy vis-à-vis its neighbouring countries. As Erdoğan adopted a more nationalist and anti-Western discourse, Davutoğlu was forced to leave the Prime Minister’s office and Turkey began to revive its old neighbour hostilities.

The first outcome of these increasing hostilities was the expulsion of the Turkish ambassador to Egypt in November 2013. Since then, Turkish regional alliances have appeared as unstable and unpredictable, breaking and remaking diplomatic ties with countries such as Russia or Israel. Exposed to the political interests of Erdoğan, Turkish foreign policy lost the institutional identity Davutoğlu had tried establish.

Turkish military and political expansionism

As a response to this hostile environment, President Erdoğan embarked on an aggressive foreign policy. In August 2016, the Turkish army started «Operation Euphrates Shield» (*Fırat Kalkanı Harekâtı*) in northern Syria. This military operation was followed by two further operations on Syrian soil, occupying the northern provinces of Idlib and Afrin.

Besides Syria, Erdoğan has also referred to Kardzhali, a Bulgarian city mostly populated by ethnic Turks. At an AKP meeting held in March of this year in the Turkish city of Sakarya, the Turkish president stated that this Bulgarian city “finds itself in the spiritual boundaries of Turkey”⁷.

⁷ Euractiv, “Bulgaria reacts to disturbing statement by Turkey’s Erdoğan”, 14th March 2018, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/bulgaria-reacts-to-disturbing-statement-by-turkeys-erdogan/> Date of query, 14.06.2018.

Taking into account these factors, the political parameters of Turkey vis-à-vis Cyprus have changed. As previously analysed, Turkish foreign policy has undergone steady militarization with energy and natural resources becoming important factors as well.

Since 2011, Turkey has also expanded its energy interests and projects. That same year, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia signed an agreement for the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP). In 2014, Russia and Turkey signed an agreement to resume the construction of an underwater gas pipeline connecting these two countries through the Black Sea, in a project called TurkStream. Furthermore, in 2016, the Turkish and Israeli Ministers of Energy and Natural Resources signed an agreement for energy cooperation, announcing plans for the construction of an underwater gas pipeline that would connect the Israeli natural gas field Leviathan to the Turkish city of Ceyhan⁸.

Within this regional political and energy scenario, the Cypriot conflict acquired a renewed role in Turkish foreign policy political discourse. For example, in 2011, after the RoC announced the first exploratory expeditions for the discovery of natural gas sea fields, the then Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan threatened to send Turkish military forces to block these expeditions⁹.

Erdoğan's reaction placed Ankara once again in the middle of the Cypriot political conflict as an interventionist actor of TRNC's policies. This interventionist role has steadily increased during this last decade. Turkey has sent its own exploratory vessels while blocking other exploratory expeditions of the RoC by sending military elements again.

Regional responses

The aggressive and militarist nature of current Turkish foreign policy has triggered a negative reaction from some important regional actors. Besides the Egyptian case,

⁸ Shadow Governance Intel, "AKP's Energy Policy and its Future Viability: Populism and Protectionism in Turkey's Energy Sector", 18th January 2017, available at <https://www.shadowgovintel.com/emerging-europe/akp-s-energy-policy-and-its-future-viability-populism-and-protectionism-in-turkey-s-energy-sector/> Date of query, 01.06.2018.

⁹ The New York Times, "Drilling Off Cyprus Will Proceed Despite Warnings From Turkey", 19th September 2011, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/world/europe/turkey-calls-cyprus-gas-drilling-a-provocation.html> Date of query, 01.06.2018.

Russian and Iranian political interests in Syria are far away from Ankara's political goals, while Turkey's repeated attacks against Kurdish armed forces have triggered negative reactions from Brussels and Washington as well.

Turkey's support of the rebel faction in Syria, the Free Syrian Army, is also a negative factor in Turkish relations with the Sunni-Arab bloc, led by Saudi Arabia, and followed by other countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, among others.

In terms of energy policy, Turkey's aspiration to become a regional and global energy hub is incompatible with the energy policy of other key regional actors. This confrontation has been demonstrated in the Cypriot scenario, where hostilities have increased. In this sense, an energy race for the exploitation of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean region is ongoing, under heavily politicised strategies.

Energy race



Figure 2: Oil and natural gas fields in the East Mediterranean region. Source: EIA

The high expectations created with the discovery of natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean region are directly affecting the behaviour of the political actors involved in the Cypriot conflict. Besides Greece and Turkey, other countries are also contributing to upsetting this fragile equilibrium.

Political blocs

Economic and political interests have been mixed in this region with the ultimate goal of commercialising natural gas in European markets. This context has facilitated the creation of two blocs, one led by Turkey and a second one by the RoC alongside Greece, Egypt and Israel.

Israel and Egypt have also discovered natural gas sea fields in their respective EEZs. In 2010, the gas field of Leviathan was discovered within Israeli waters, while in 2015, the Egyptian Zohr natural gas field was discovered.

This bloc, formed by the RoC, Greece, Israel and Egypt, has carried out various press meetings to announce its intention to build an underwater natural gas pipeline connecting all these gas fields with Europe. This way, the RoC would become the regional gas hub, marginalising Turkey's regional prospects.

For these reasons, Turkey has officially opposed the projects led by the RoC, and although it does not have official support from other regional or global powers, its navy has been able to unilaterally stop drilling by companies related to the other bloc. For example, in February of this year, a drilling vessel of the Italian company ENI was stopped and forced to go back to Italy by a Turkish military ship.

As Professor Ahmet Sözen, interviewed by the author, points out, unilateral movements of certain actors in the Eastern Mediterranean have been facilitated by a partial withdrawal of the United States. Sözen, director of the Cyprus Policy Center, adds that Russia is also an obstructive presence in the Cypriot peace settlement negotiations to preserve its hegemonic role in the natural gas markets of Europe.

Natural gas and the Cypriot conflict

As analysed throughout this document, Athens and Ankara's political agendas have had a direct impact in the Cypriot conflict. In this sense, the energy race currently taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean can only serve to complicate a peace settlement on this island.

Although it was initially thought that the natural gas resources discovered in this region would incentivize a peace settlement, hostilities between the two Cypriot communities have actually worsened.

After the discovery of the Aphrodite natural gas field, the government of the TRNC demanded its participation in the exploitation of these resources, but the RoC immediately refused. According to Professor Sözen, the RoC has convinced Ankara to explicitly support the RoC in this matter, a policy that would also secure the support of the international community.

The refusal of the RoC to share its natural gas resources with the Turkish community triggered an aggressive reaction from Ankara, which through its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, accused the RoC government of acting as the «sole owners of the island»¹⁰.

At the same time, two months after Çavuşoğlu's declarations, the Greek President, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, stated that a series of inhabited islands in the Aegean Sea belonged to Greece. These statements indicate a return to the 1990s, where Ankara and Athens maintained confrontational discourses, a situation that again threatens a possible Cyprus settlement.

This political environment has legitimised Turkish military operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, popular among Turkish society. As previously mentioned, a drilling vessel owned by the Italian energy company ENI was blocked by a Turkish military ship in Cypriot waters. Although the EU condemned this military operation, Turkey's message was clear: as long as energy resources are not shared among both communities in

¹⁰ Cyprus Mail, "New approach needed to prevent natural gas standoff", 8th April 2018, available at <http://cyprus-mail.com/2017/04/08/new-approach-needed-prevent-natural-gas-standoff/> Date of query, 18.06.2018.

Cyprus, Turkey will block any attempt of drilling or exploitation of the natural gas fields in Cypriot waters, including through the using its navy.

It is important to highlight that this policy is not exclusive to the AKP, since its main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP) also supports this policy. Through its member and president of the energy commission of the Turkish Parliament, Necdet Pamir, the CHP declared that Turkey cannot change its policy in Cyprus as long as the RoC does not include the TRNC in drilling operations¹¹.

Although natural gas fields could have meant a common platform for the improvement of political relations between both Cypriot entities, Greece and Turkey have increased their hostile political discourses in relation to the exploitation of these natural resources.

The high costs of the pipelines projected by Greece and Turkey make the commercialisation of the Aphrodite natural gas field almost unviable. Moreover, natural gas market prices also reduce the possible benefits of the commercialisation of this gas. Given these factors, it is very likely that Aphrodite energy resources will be commercialised through the Egyptian ports of Damietta and Idku. These two ports contain the infrastructure for liquefying natural gas (Liquefied Natural Gas) and reducing its costs of transportation and commercialisation to European markets.

With Egypt as a *de facto* energy hub¹², the energy dispute between Greece and Turkey in Cyprus appears to be more a political dispute with electoral interests.

According to Professor Kaymak, the discovery of natural gas fields in Cyprus is very likely to complicate a peace settlement in this island, since this conflict is based on a «sovereignty game». Besides blocking ENI's vessel, Turkey has also sent its own drilling ship to Cyprus.

The blocking of ENI's vessel and military interventions in Syria and Iraq have not triggered international sanctions against Turkey. Should it unilaterally drill in Cypriot waters, Turkey

¹¹ Politico, "Med natural gas find brings conflict dividends", 3rd June 2018, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/natural-gas-mediterranean-cyprus-turkey-more-gas-more-problems/> Date of query, 18.06.2018.

¹² Middle East Eye, "\$19.5bn Israeli gas deal with Spanish company scrapped", 24th March 2018, available at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/union-fenosa-tamar-israel-egypt-spain-gas-east-mediterranean-leviathan-180251201> Date of query, 18.06.2018.

would not reap much benefit from this natural gas since it does not have the necessary infrastructure to commercialise these resources.

In this political game, a move like this from Turkey could again threaten political rapprochement in Cyprus. According to Kaymak, since the RoC cannot directly oppose Turkey's military power, it could use other mechanisms to stop Turkish drilling in its waters.

In sum, political fighting for the control of the Cypriot natural gas fields is reinforcing hostile and nationalist discourse on both sides. These hostilities ultimately reinforce the political and economic separation between both communities in Cyprus, complicating the peaceful settlement of the island even more.

Conclusions

The discovery of natural gas resources in Cypriot international waters appears as a destabilising factor for a possible peace settlement in Cyprus. More importantly, the gas discovery extends this increased political unrest to other regional actors with interests in the exploitation and commercialisation of this gas. Among them are the two historical protectors of the Cypriot communities, Greece and Turkey.

In part, this new confrontational environment in the region has been triggered by an interventionist Turkish foreign policy. Despite Turkey's loss of political support from its allies in the region, as most of them lost power after 2011, this country has increased its military presence in other countries, such as Syria, Iraq and Qatar.

The militarist behaviour of Turkey directly effects the Cypriot conflict, as Turkey is adopting a more active and protective role with the TRNC. Moreover, Cyprus is steadily gaining importance in Turkish politics as the AKP and Erdoğan aim to make Turkey a global and regional energy hub. Within 2023 Turkish energy goals, Cyprus' resources are likely to become a political target for Turkey.

Within this context, Greek foreign policy has also been tainted by a more nationalist and identity-based discourse. According to sources in Greece, the current Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Kotzias, is confronting Turkish regional aspirations, reigniting the historical hostility between Athens and Ankara which ultimately affects the Cypriot conflict, where Greece is again adopting a protectionist role.

The increase of identity and nationalist discourse in the Eastern Mediterranean is legitimising a political race for the control of energy resources in this region while altering its fragile political equilibrium. Although a military confrontation in Cyprus seems to be far away, the use of these political discourses is hindering the peaceful settlement of a conflict that has lasted for more than 40 years.

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